

Illustrative of suitable natural fibers include cellulosic fibers, cotton, jute, pulp, wool and the like. When natural fiber webs are utilized, a binder or an adhesive, in the form of fibers or powders, may be sprayed on or mixed with the fibers of the web to consolidate the constituent fibers or otherwise applied to form bonded regions. Illustrative of suitable binders include ethylene vinylacetate, acrylate adhesives, acrylic adhesives, latex and the like.

Synthetic fibers suitable for the present invention are produced from synthetic thermoplastic polymers that are known to form fibers, which include, but not limited to, polyolefins, e.g., polyethylene, polypropylene, polybutylene and the like; polyamides, e.g., nylon 6, nylon 6/6, nylon 10, nylon 12 and the like; polyesters, e.g., polyethylene terephthalate, polybutylene terephthalate and the like; polycarbonate; polystyrene; thermoplastic elastomers; vinyl polymers; polyurethane; and blend and copolymers thereof. Additionally suitable fibers include glass fibers, carbon fibers, semi-synthetic fibers, e.g., viscose rayon fibers and cellulose acetate fibers, and the like. In accordance with known properties of each polymer, synthetic and semi-synthetic polymer fibers can be bonded autogenously, i.e., the fibers of the web are melt-fused under heat and pressure, or with the use of a binder. For example, fiber webs of polyolefins, polyamides, polyesters, vinyl polymers or the like can be autogenously bonded, and webs of glass fibers and/or carbon fibers require the use of a binder.

Suitable staple fiber webs may be prepared by carding a mass of staple fibers with a woollen or cotton carding machine or a garnetting machine, and suitable continuous fiber webs may be prepared by conventional air laying methods that produce webs from meltblown fibers and/or spunbond fibers. As used herein, the term "meltblown fibers" indicates fibers formed by extruding a molten thermoplastic polymer through a plurality of fine, usually circular, die capillaries as molten threads or filaments into a high velocity gas stream which attenuate the filaments of molten thermoplastic polymer to reduce their diameter. In general, meltblown fibers have an average fiber diameter of up to about 10 microns. After the

fibers are formed, they are carried by the high velocity gas stream and are deposited on a collecting surface to form a web of randomly disbursed meltblown fibers. Such a process is disclosed, for example, in U.S. Patent 3,849,241 to Butin. As used herein, the term "spunbond fibers" refers to small diameter fibers which are formed by extruding a molten thermoplastic polymer as filaments from a plurality of fine, usually circular, capillaries of a spinneret. The extruded filaments are then rapidly drawn by an eductive or other well-known drawing mechanism. The resulting fibers, in general, have an average diameter larger than that of meltblown fibers. Typically, spunbond fibers have an average diameter in excess of 12 microns and up to about 55 microns. The production of spunbond webs is disclosed, for example, in U.S. Patents 4,340,563 to Appel et al. and 3,692,618 to Dorschner et al.

The fabrics of the present invention further include laminates of two or more of the above-mentioned nonwoven webs and laminates of nonwoven webs and films. Various films known in the art, particularly thermoplastic films, can be bonded to the nonwoven webs, autogenously or with the use of a binder, to provide added barrier properties, such as moisture, chemical and aroma barrier properties. Useful thermoplastic films can be produced from, for example, polyolefins, e.g., polyethylene, polypropylene, polybutylene and the like; polyamides, e.g., nylon 6, nylon 6/6, nylon 10, nylon 12 and the like; polyesters, e.g., polyethylene terephthalate, polybutylene terephthalate and the like; polycarbonate; polystyrene; thermoplastic elastomers; vinyl polymers; polyurethane; and blend and copolymers thereof.

The present invention can be practiced employing any pattern bond forming process known in the art. Preferably, the bond pattern is applied using a conventional calender bonding process. In general, the calender bonding process employs pattern roll pairs for bonding at limited areas of the web by passing it through the nip between the rolls while at least one of which is heated and has a pattern of lands and depressions on its surface. Alternatively, the bond pattern can be applied by passing the web through a gap formed by an ultrasonic work horn and anvil. The anvil may be in

the form of a roll having raised portions to provide a pattern bonded fabric.

5 The temperature of the pattern rolls and the nip pressure should be selected so as to effect bonding without having undesirable accompanying side effects such as excessive shrinkage or web degradation. Although appropriate roll temperatures and nip pressures are generally influenced to an extent by parameters such as web speed, web basis weight, fiber characteristics, presence or
10 absence of adhesives and the like, it is preferred that the roll temperature be in the range between softening and crystalline melting temperatures of the component fiber polymer in combination with nip pressures on raised points (pin pressure) of about 1,000 to about 50,000 psi. It may not be desirable to expose the web to a temperature where extensive fiber melting occurs. For example,
15 the preferred pattern bonding settings for polypropylene webs are a roll temperature in the range of about 260°F and 320°F, and a pin pressure in the range of about 1,000 psi and about 10,000 psi. However, when adhesives other than melt-adhesives are utilized to consolidate and to form the present bond pattern, no significant
20 heat and pressure need to be applied since only a minimal pin pressure is needed to hold the fibers in place until the adhesives cure to form permanent bonds.

Suitable pattern rolls for the present invention may be produced from well known materials, such as steels for patterned
25 rolls and high temperature rubbers for smooth rolls, and according to processes well known in the art. The pattern rolls of the present invention can be conveniently produced by removing appropriate lands from finished pattern rolls that contain geometrically repeating base bond patterns. Alternatively, the
30 pattern rolls may be produced from a mold containing desired patterns. Suitable pattern roll forming procedures are well known in the engraving art. The bond patterns of the present invention, as an alternative to the above-described in-line roll patterning process, can also be formed by stamping processes known in the art,
35 using male and female molds.

As an illustration of the present invention, Figure 1 represents one manner of preparing a three layer laminate of two

outer spunbond webs and a middle meltblown web, which is bonded in accordance with the present bond pattern process. As shown, a curtain of continuous spunbond filaments 10 is prepared by a spinneret assembly 12. The filaments are deposited in a substantially random manner onto a moving foraminous carrier belt 14 driven over a set of drive rolls 16, 18 to form a spunbond web 20. Onto the spunbond web 20, a layer of meltblown fibers 24 is deposited to form a two layer laminate 26. The meltblown fibers 24 are prepared with a meltblown fiber spinneret assembly 28. The two layer laminate 26 continues to travel on the carrier belt 14 to reach an additional spunbond spinneret assembly 32 where the other outer layer 34 of spunbond fibers is deposited onto the laminate, forming the three layer laminate 36. Appropriate suction means 22, 30 and 42 may be presented under the carrier belt 14 away from the spinneret assemblies to assist proper placement of each fiber layer. Subsequently, the three layer laminate 36 is passed through the pressure nip between a heated roll 38 and another heated roll 40 which contains a pattern of lands and depressions. The two heated rolls 38, 40 are commonly referred to as patterning or embossing rolls. The bonded, patterned laminate is then removed from the heated rolls 38, 40.

Although Figure 1 discloses the process of bonding a laminate of three nonwoven webs, the present invention is not limited thereto. The present bond pattern can be utilized for one or more layers of nonwoven webs and for laminates of nonwoven webs and films. In addition, both of the heated rolls 38, 40 may have repeating bond patterns, and more than one set of patterning rolls can be employed.

Figures 2-5 provide non-limiting examples of bond patterns that can be created in accordance with the present invention. In Figure 2, for example, four closely associated unbonded areas 50 form a small diamond pattern and four of the small diamond pattern form a large diamond pattern, providing a highly distinct and readily recognizable pattern to the nonwoven fabric. Adjacent unbonded areas 50 forming the small diamond pattern are separated by a bonded area 52 to ensure physical integrity of the resulting fabric. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate different sizes of square

patterns that are formed by the above-mentioned small diamond pattern. Figure 5 illustrates a distinct square pattern formed by equally spaced unbonded areas. Figure 6 illustrates yet another bond pattern of the present invention which is based on a different base bond pattern than the base pattern of Figures 2-5.

The present bond patterns provide distinctly identifiable marks that can be easily applied and changed to create many different, useful bond patterns without significantly altering the physical properties of the resulting nonwoven fabric. In addition, the bond patterns are highly useful as aligning or size reference points for different processes using the nonwoven fabrics. Such aligning or size reference points are useful, for example, in cutting operations where nonwoven fabric parts for nonwoven fabric gowns, disposable diapers or the like are prepared.

Although the present bond pattern is illustrated with nonwoven fabric and laminates thereof, the present bond pattern can also be useful for various films and laminates thereof to provide the above-mentioned utilities of the present invention.

The invention is described further with reference to the following examples, which are provided for illustration purposes and are not intended to limit the present invention thereto.

EXAMPLES 1-4

Four three-layer polypropylene nonwoven fabrics having different bond pattern as illustrated in Figures 2-5, which are Examples 1-4 respectively, were prepared and physical characteristics of the fabrics were compared. The fabrics were prepared in a process as shown in Figure 1: an external spunbond layer is formed onto the carrier belt; a middle layer of meltblown fiber is deposited onto the external spunbond layer; and the other external spunbond layer is formed on the meltblown layer. The weight of the spunbond layers was about 0.85 oz/yd² and of the meltblown layer was about 0.5 oz/yd². Subsequently, the resulting three-layer nonwoven laminate is fed into the nip of a calender roll and an anvil roll. The calender roll was a steel roll having a patterned configuration of raised points (lands) on its surface and a diameter of about 24 inches (61 cm). The calender roll was

equipped with a heating means and the raised points (lands) thereon were about 0.04 inch (0.1 cm) high and positioned such that the resulting bonded fabric contained regularly spaced bonded areas in a square pattern. The anvil roll was a smooth stainless steel 24 inch diameter roll with a heating means. Both of the rolls were heated at about 305°F (152°C) and the pressure applied on the webs was 500 lbs/linear inch of width. The calender rolls used in Examples 1-4 were prepared by removing appropriate lands from the above-described calender rolls having regularly spaced lands and had a pin density of about 34 lands per cm² and each of the lands had a bonding area of about 0.0074 cm². The size of each of the resulting unbonded areas was about 0.07 cm². Abrasion resistance was tested in accordance with the ASTM D4970-89 testing procedure, which measures the resistance to abrasion of nonwoven fabrics. Draped stiffness was tested in accordance with Method 5206 of Federal Test Methods Standard No. 191A, which measures the resistance to bending of a fabric. Elongation, grab tensile strength (GT) and peak load energy (PKLE) were tested in accordance with Method 5100 of Federal Test Methods Standard No. 191A. Each test other than abrasion resistance was conducted in both machine direction (MD) and cross-machine direction (CD). The results are shown in Table below.

Control

A bonded fabric was produced by following the procedure outlined for Example 1, except an unmodified base calender roll described in Example 1 was used.

TABLE

Example	Abrasion	Drape Stiffness (in.)		Elongation (%)		GT (lb.)		PKLE (in-lbs)	
		CD	MD	CD	MD	CD	MD	CD	MD
1	5	5.9	6.9	57.5	46.7	33.5	43.8	34.3	37.6
2	5	5.6	5.8	65.2	53.3	35.8	48.1	41.9	47.0
3	5	5.8	6.7	61.6	52.9	36.1	47.5	40.0	46.7
4	5	5.7	6.6	55.2	47.8	34.1	44.7	33.7	39.5
Control	5	5.5	6.2	56.1	50.9	35.8	45.9	35.7	43.2

As can be seen from the above examples and Figures 2-5, the bond pattern of the present invention does not significantly degrade the physical properties of the nonwoven fabric while providing visually identifiable bond patterns. Consequently, the bond patterns of the present invention are highly useful as identification marks to denote various information, such as sources of origin, characteristics and properties of and designated uses for nonwoven fabrics, without significantly altering the physical properties of the nonwoven fabrics.

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What is claimed is:

1. A distinctly identifiable bond pattern for nonwoven fabrics having a geometrically repeating pattern of bonded regions, which bond pattern comprises a series of unbonded regions in said geometric pattern of bonded regions, each unbonded region forming an unbonded area enclosed by the bonded regions surrounding said unbonded region, whereby said series of unbonded regions forms a visually recognizable pattern, wherein said bonded regions cover from about 3% to about 50% of the surface of said nonwoven fabric, and wherein the size of each of said unbonded areas is equal to or less than about 0.3 cm².
2. The bond pattern of claim 1 wherein said nonwoven fabric comprises at least one layer of nonwoven fiber web.
3. The bond pattern of claim 2 wherein said fiber web is formed from thermoplastic fibers, natural fibers or mixtures thereof.
4. The bond pattern of claim 1 wherein said fabric comprises a laminate of at least one nonwoven fiber web and at least one film.
5. The bond pattern of claim 1 wherein the area defined by the bonded regions between adjacent unbonded areas is equal to or greater than about 50% of the size average of said unbonded areas.
6. The bond pattern of claim 1 wherein said unbonded area has a size equal to or less than about 0.25 cm².
7. The bond pattern of claim 2 wherein said nonwoven web is formed from polyolefin fibers.
8. The bond pattern of claim 2 wherein said nonwoven web is formed from nylon fibers.
9. The bond pattern of claim 1 wherein said bond pattern covers from about 5% to about 35% of the surface of said nonwoven fabric.
10. A nonwoven fabric having the bond pattern of claim 1.
11. A nonwoven fabric having at least one distinctly identifiable bond pattern, said fabric having a geometrically repeating pattern of bonded regions, said bond pattern comprising a series of unbonded regions in said geometric pattern of bonded regions, each unbonded region forming an unbonded area enclosed by the bonded regions surrounding said unbonded region, whereby said

series of unbonded regions forms a visually recognizable pattern, wherein said bonded regions cover from about 3% to about 50% of the surface of said nonwoven fabric, and wherein the size of each of said unbonded areas is equal to or less than about 0.3 cm².

5 12. The nonwoven fabric of claim 11 wherein said nonwoven fabric comprises at least one layer of nonwoven fiber web.

13. The nonwoven fabric of claim 12 wherein said fiber web is formed from thermoplastic fibers, natural fibers or mixtures thereof.

10 14. The nonwoven fabric of claim 11 wherein said fabric is a laminate of at least one nonwoven fiber web and at least one film.

15 15. The nonwoven fabric of claim 11 wherein the area enclosed by the bonded regions between adjacent unbonded areas is equal to or greater than about 50% of the size average of said unbonded areas.

16. The nonwoven fabric of claim 12 wherein said nonwoven web is formed from polyolefin fibers.

20 17. The nonwoven fabric of claim 11 wherein said bond pattern covers from about 5% to about 35% of the surface of said nonwoven fabric.

25 18. A bonding process for producing a nonwoven fabric containing a distinctly identifiable bond pattern, comprising the step of feeding at least one layer of nonwoven web into the nip formed by a set of abuttingly placed patterning rolls, at least one of said set of patterning rolls having a geometrically repeating bond pattern of lands that is modified by a series of absent lands, said lands present on said patterning roll occupying from about 3% to about 50% of the surface of said patterning roll, each of said absent lands forming a nonbonding area defined by the lands surrounding said absent land, said nonbonding area having a size equal to or less than about 0.3 cm², whereby said series of absent lands forms a visually recognizable pattern.

30 19. The bonding process of claim 18 wherein said nonwoven web comprises thermoplastic fibers, natural fibers or mixtures thereof.

35 20. The bonding process of claim 18 wherein said nonwoven web comprises a laminate of at least one nonwoven fiber web and at least one film.

21. The bonding process of claim 18 wherein the area enclosed by the lands between adjacent nonbonding areas is equal to or greater than about 50% of the size average of said adjacent nonbonding areas.

5 22. A laminate of nonwoven fabrics comprising a spunbond web, a meltblown web and a spunbond web and having at least one distinctly identifiable bond pattern, said fabric having a geometrically repeating pattern of bonded regions, said bond pattern comprising a series of unbonded regions in said geometric pattern
10 of bonded regions, each unbonded region forming an unbonded area enclosed by the bonded regions surrounding said unbonded region, whereby said series of unbonded regions forms a visually recognizable pattern, wherein said bonded regions cover from about 3% to about 50% of the surface of said nonwoven fabric, and wherein
15 the size of each of said unbonded area is equal to or less than about 0.3 cm².

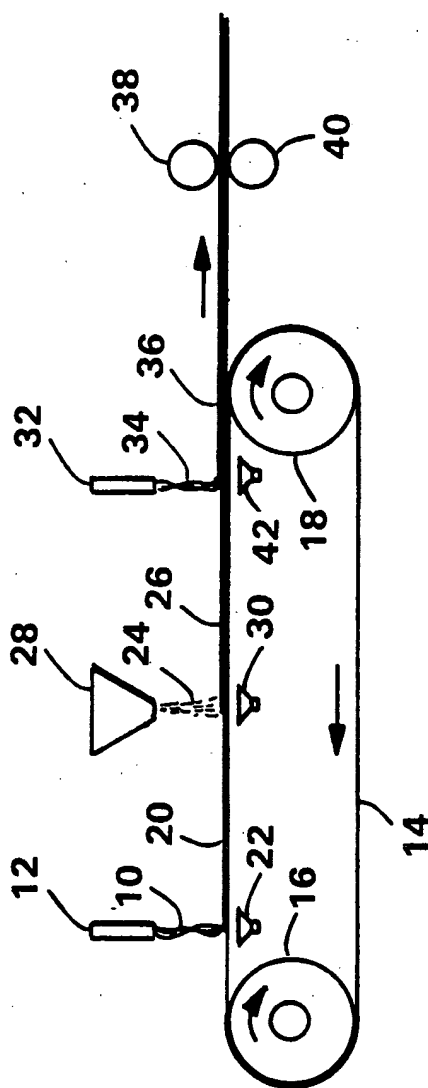
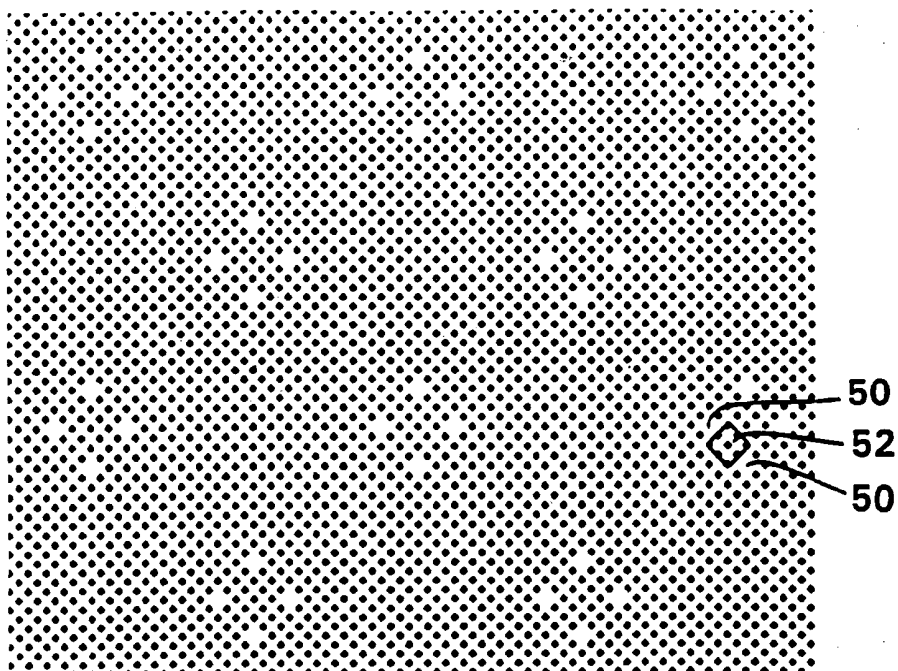
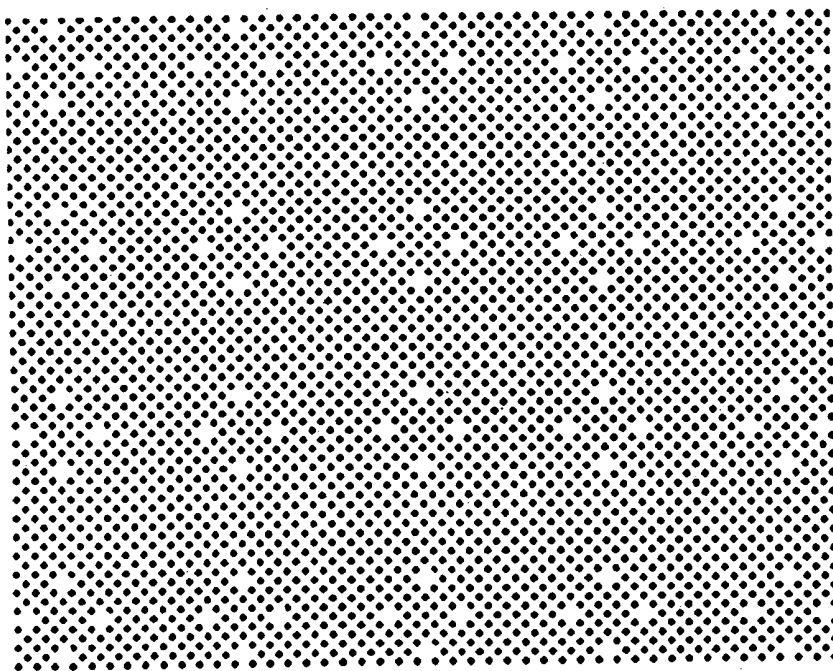


FIG. 1

**FIG. 2****FIG. 3**

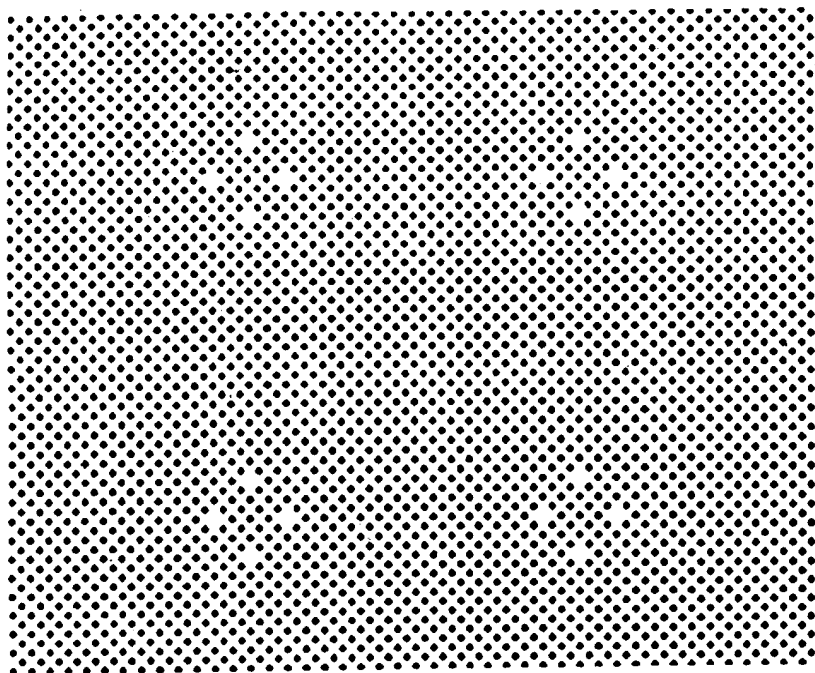


FIG. 4

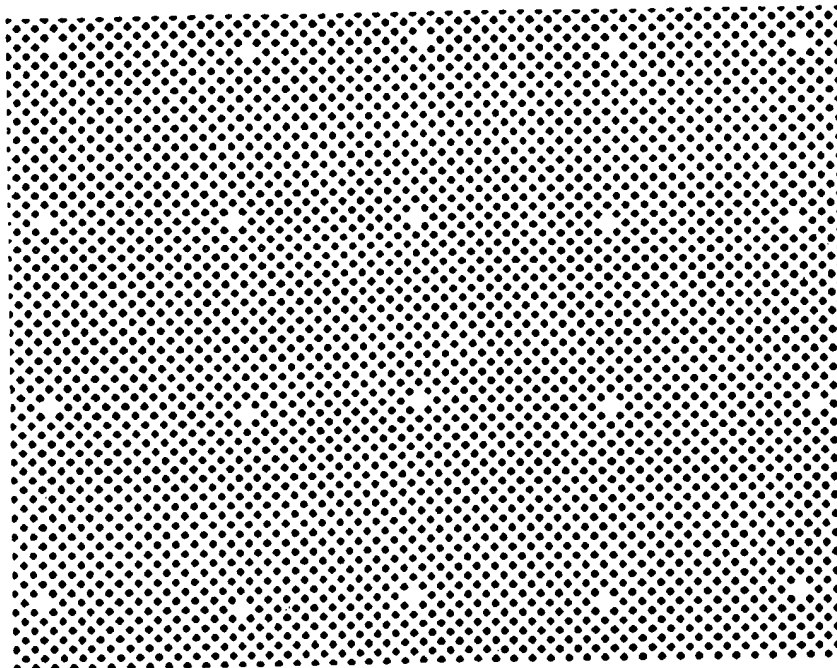


FIG. 5

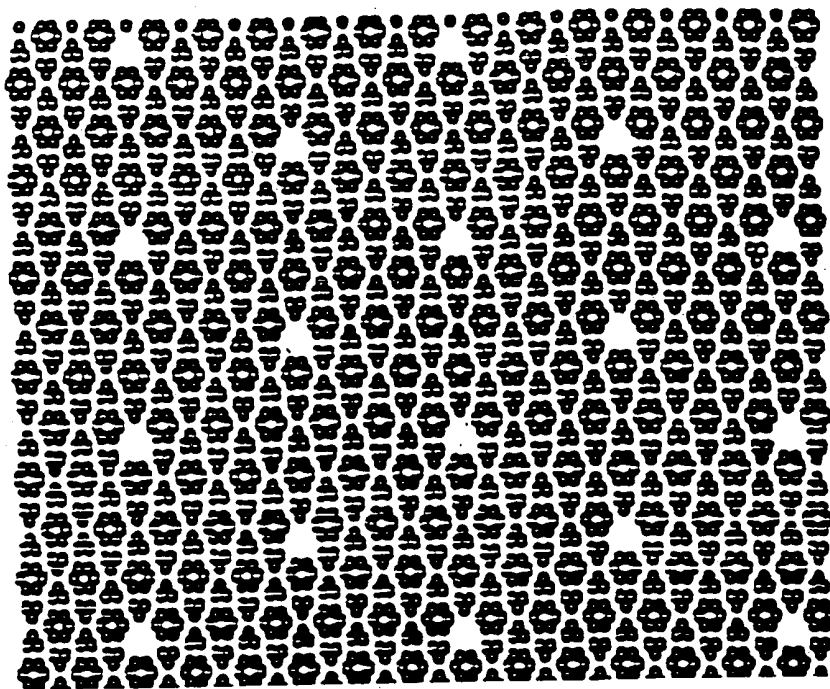


FIG. 6

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER
IPC 6 D04H1/54 D04H13/00

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

IPC 6 D04H

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practical, search terms used)

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category *	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
P,A	EP,A,0 569 860 (KIMBERLY-CLARK CORPORATION) 18 November 1993 see page 4, line 12 - page 5, line 43 ---	1-22
P,A	US,A,5 266 390 (GARLAND) 30 November 1993 see column 3, line 17 - column 5, line 2 ---	1-4,7,11
A	FR,A,2 307 904 (IMPERIAL CHEMICAL INDUSTRIES LTD.) 12 November 1976 see page 2, line 23 - page 5, line 8 ---	1,11
A	GB,A,2 024 709 (THE KENDALL COMPANY) 16 January 1980 see page 1, line 60 - line 125 -----	1

☐ Further documents are listed in the continuation of box C.

☒ Patent family members are listed in annex.

* Special categories of cited documents :

- *A* document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance
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Date of the actual completion of the international search

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INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

Information on patent family members

International Application No

PCT/US 94/03412

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